

EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

PRESIDENT CLINTON'S VISIT TO BULGARIA HIGHLIGHTS COUNTRY'S TOLERANCE

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, November 22, 1999

Mr. LANTOS. Mr. Speaker, today President Bill Clinton is in Bulgaria, the first visit by a President of the United States to this important Balkan country. One of the principal purposes of President Clinton's trip to Bulgaria is to recognize and acknowledge the contribution Bulgaria made to NATO during the conflict in Yugoslavia. Bulgaria permitted NATO aircraft to overfly its territory during the air campaign against Serbia, and Bulgaria has suffered substantial economic losses as a result of economic sanctions against Yugoslavia (Serbia). An expression of the gratitude of the United States is most appropriate.

In addition to Bulgaria's cooperation in the conflict with Yugoslavia, Mr. Speaker, Bulgaria has contributed to regional peacekeeping and security. It maintains constructive relations with all of its neighbors, and it is host to the Southeastern Europe Multinational Peacekeeping Force, which comprises personnel from eight countries in the region. Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the sovereignty of neighboring Macedonia, setting an example of how countries in the Balkans can respect internationally-recognized borders and governments. Bulgaria has expressed its desire to become a member of NATO, and as Bulgaria continues to progress economically and politically Mr. Speaker, what President Clinton is seeing in Bulgaria is a country that is very different than the image most Americans have of the Balkans—and a country that is a stark contrast to its western neighbor, Yugoslavia.

Over the past decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet domination of Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria has been transformed from a Soviet satellite into a functioning democracy. Several peaceful and competitive elections have been held—the most recent just two weeks ago. The current government of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov is implementing a broad program of economic and structural reforms that have produced modest levels of growth, controlled inflation, high levels of foreign investment, and international assistance. Financial markets have stabilized with the discipline of a currency board. State enterprises are being privatized. The Bulgarian economy is on a path that will lead toward eventual membership in the European Union, with accession negotiations scheduled to begin with Brussels next year.

Mr. Speaker, what separates Bulgaria from many of its neighbors is its deeply ingrained sense of religious and ethnic tolerance. Earlier in this century, Bulgaria welcomed thousands of Armenian refugees who were subjected to suffering and persecution in Turkey and other countries of the region. Then, during World

War II, Bulgarians demonstrated a remarkable example of national courage and heroism when they acted to save the country's Jewish population, which numbered 50,000 persons, from deportation to Nazi death camps.

This is a story largely unknown outside of Bulgaria, although my wife Annette has made considerable efforts to publicize the heroic efforts of the Bulgarian people. Despite strong pressure from Hitler's Germany, thousands of Bulgarians—parliamentarians, religious leaders, intellectuals, and ordinary workers risked their own lives and refused to send their neighbors and fellow Bulgarians to the Nazi crematoria. As a result, not a single Bulgarian Jew living within the boundaries of the country was sent to a concentration camp.

More recently, Mr. Speaker, Bulgarians have sought to better integrate the minority Turkish population—which numbers some 800,000 persons among a population of 8.4 million persons—into the political and economic life of the country. Under communism, Bulgaria in the mid-1980's forced ethnic Turks to assimilate with the majority population by changing their names. Mosques were closed. Turkish-language education was curtailed. Many thousands of ethnic Turks fled the country.

After communism's collapse, however, relations between Turks and Bulgarians improved dramatically. Bulgaria's pragmatic President, Petar Stoyanov, publicly apologized for his country's behavior toward its ethnic Turks at the time when the country was under communist rule. Turkey and Bulgaria have signed a series of agreements on free trade, cross-border investment, customs tariffs and even military cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, in addition, Bulgarian Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders often work together, and in some communities churches and mosques are found in the same neighborhood. The two governments have initiated a program to help reunite Bulgarian and Turkish families separated by past conflicts. Bulgaria provided emergency relief in the wake of recent earthquakes that devastated Turkey. These initiatives have helped heal the wounds of the past.

Mr. Speaker, at the core of Bulgaria's efforts to promote tolerance has been political inclusion and education. In October 1990, Bulgaria's first post-communist government included a Turkish party that won ten percent of the total seats in Parliament. In the area of education, Bulgarian school texts have been revised to include a more accurate history of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. School teachers from the country's Turkish regions are sent to Turkey to better learn how to teach the Turkish language.

As Europe, the United States and the international community go about the task of rebuilding Southeastern Europe in the wake of the war in Kosovo, we should look to the example of Bulgaria as a society where ethnic and religious groups are peacefully co-existing, and where tolerance is ingrained in the country's culture and history.

Mr. Speaker, the high-profile visit of President Clinton to Bulgaria calls attention to Bulgaria's fine record in this regard. Even among the multi-ethnic and multi-religious complexity so characteristic of the Balkans, which has led to so much human suffering and armed conflict in that region, people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds can live and work together peacefully and successfully. The Bulgarian people have shown that this can be done.

WEYMOUTH TOWN MEETINGS

HON. WILLIAM D. DELAHUNT

OF MASSACHUSETTS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, November 22, 1999

Mr. DELAHUNT. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Town of Weymouth, in the Tenth District of Massachusetts, which convened our nation's first Town Meeting 375 years ago—and which is about to convene its last Town Meeting tonight.

Originally called "Wessagusset," Weymouth was settled in 1622, making it the second-oldest town in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. After less than a year facing New England's harsh conditions, Weymouth's Captain Robert Gorges soon abandoned the settlement, leaving those pioneers who remained to reorganize. Out of the desire for self-government under extraordinary conditions, the Town's citizenry called for a "Meeting of the Inhabitants" for the purpose of constituting a government.

That first Town Meeting was held in the spring of 1624 on Hunt's Hill. Capable citizens were chosen to fill newly-established offices, and voting rights were defined. As the meetings continued, all matters of public interest were considered and acted upon according to the direct will of the inhabitants. The meetings were in effect a legislative body, while those who had been appointed as "townsmen" served as the executive branch.

Meetings were called whenever any important question required action—and that was frequently. Freedom of speech, maintenance of personal rights and adherence to the high purpose that in due time became incorporated in the Constitution of the United States have since animated Weymouth's Town Meetings.

In the spring of 1624, the Town Meeting was a new venture in government, and a new experience for its participants. Over the years since, the Town Meeting has developed into a pillar of local democracy for which the nation owes a great deal of thanks.

And now, as the Town embarks on an historic new path, we wish much success in advance to its first Mayor, to members of its new Town Council, and to the scores of local residents whose vigorous discourse has made Weymouth a model of participatory democracy—over the last 375 years, and into the next millennium.

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